

Nice piece of kit – shame about the price

Procurement problems

The vast majority of patients who are cured of their cancer are cured because of surgery or radiotherapy. However, the current system of procurement precludes the NHS from taking full advantage of the latest cutting edge treatments.

Despite the vital importance of radiotherapy – and the cancer taskforce’s report (Achieving World-Class Cancer Outcomes: A Strategy for England 2015-2020) commitment to improving existing services – the current system of procurement precludes the NHS from taking full advantage of the latest cutting edge treatments.

This is highlighted in the NHS’s provision of **proton beam therapy** – a high cost, advanced form of radiotherapy that targets tumours with great precision and spares critical organs better than other radiotherapy based treatments.

In 2010, the UK government announced its intention to build two new proton therapy centres at a cost of £250m. However, given the nature of this therapy – cutting edge but capital intensive – combined with the protracted nature of the NHS’ procurement process, the NHS has now found itself committed to purchasing a first-generation technology that has already been superseded by developments in the private sector. All this before the machines have even been built.

Consequently, the health department is facing the prospect of a £250m invoice for two slightly outdated, extremely large and slightly inferior proton therapy machines, which one cancer expert has described as “concrete mausoleums”.

A way forward

For treatments such as proton therapy, rather than procuring the treatment technology for use in house and taking responsibility for the on-going maintenance and service costs, the health department could make greater use of subcontracting arrangements with the private sector, whereby external providers are responsible for establishing, operating and maintaining clinical centres. Indeed, this idea has already taken hold and the UK public will probably benefit from the services of several private (IBA equipped) proton therapy centres located in Cardiff, Newcastle and London.